

The Work Of The Word In Believers

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[0 : 00] There are two groups of people described in the text that we're studying today. Really, the two groups are different in many ways, actually. Culturally, ethnically, religiously.

Those differences, though, ultimately, as you know, are relatively unimportant. They don't really matter in the long run. The crucial way that the two groups presented here in these verses are different actually flows from an experience that they share.

Both groups have had the immense privilege of receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, in the context of this passage, is referred to as the Word of God.

And still, they differ in how they respond to receiving that Word. One group accepts and welcomes what they receive by faith.

The other rejects it. And the group that accepts the gospel does so, according to the text, because the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to recognize the preaching of Christ as the Word of God.

[1 : 18] And they're so convinced that they are prepared to suffer and to die for that truth, knowing that death is but a doorway to life in Jesus Christ.

The other group hears the same gospel, but in the hardness of their hearts, rejects it as being merely the words of men.

This group ultimately hates what the other calls truth. And while the one is prepared to die for it, this group is ready to destroy on account of it.

They're blind to the truth, lost in sin and unbelief, and destined for God's eternal wrath.

And we all this morning share in the same exact privilege as they did. This gospel message, the Word of God, it is readily available to us.

[2 : 25] We will experience the preaching of it again in these very moments moving forward in our service. And what we find over and over in the Scriptures is that taking a neutral or somewhat neutral position on this truth is not actually an option that's on the table for us.

You will either accept it as the Word of God, or you will reject it as the words of men. And the overarching question that I want to pose to all of us this morning is this.

To which of these groups do you truly belong? Which one? The one who receives the Word and accepts it as the Word of God, or receives it and rejects it as merely the words of men?

Let's read the text together. Chapter 2, verses 13 to 16. Paul writes, We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men, but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers.

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God and Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, drove us out, and displeased God, and opposed all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

[4 : 06] So as always to fill up the measure of their sins, but wrath has come upon them at last.

We've now come full circle in the movement of thought through the first two chapters of 1 Thessalonians.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy began their correspondence, as you will recall, by giving thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers' spirit-empowered conversion and spirit-enabled perseverance of faith.

And then as Paul reflected on his time in Thessalonica, he briefly shifts the focus away from the Thessalonians themselves and turns it to the authentic nature of his ministry to them, distinguishing himself from the false teachers of the day.

And here, as we get closer to the end of chapter 2, Paul returns now to that initial theme, that initial theme of the Thessalonians' conversion and perseverance of faith through severe persecution.

And as you notice in verse 13, once again, his remembrance of the gospel's work in the lives of these people that he has come to love is expressed primarily as thanksgiving, not thanksgiving to the Thessalonians, thanksgiving to God for the work that he has done in them and that he continues to do through them.

[5 : 39] The opening thanksgiving of chapter 1 underscores the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in these new believers. But as Paul reflects on the same event in these verses, he's not changing the topic, he's still reflecting on his initial time in ministry in Thessalonica and the work that God was doing there and the results of the fruitfulness of that work.

Here, as he rehearses that once again, he highlights especially the Spirit's work through the ministry of the Word of God, the preaching of the gospel of Jesus from the Scriptures. And an important statement at the end of verse 13 is what gives us the passage's central idea that the Word of God is at work.

The Word of God is at work. You see it there in verse 13. He says, you accepted it for what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work.

And he continues by saying, it is at work explicitly in believers. And then as we look at this set of verses as a unit, we find also that implicit in the text is that the Word is at work against unbelievers.

[7 : 02] And it's these two categories that are going to shape our study this morning and next week. We won't really move beyond the first category this morning. And so we'll return to it next week.

So what I want to focus on now is the work of the Word in believers. The work of the Word in believers. In this text, especially verses 13 and 14, the Word of God accomplishes two distinct works in believers.

It brings about their salvation and it secures them in that salvation. In other words, the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to effect one's conversion to Christ and subsequent perseverance through suffering.

The Word of God, we would understand, also works in the believer's sanctification, but Paul doesn't address that at least at this point. Only these first two are noted and so those are the two that I want to meditate on now.

What is the work of the Word in believers according to this text? Well, first we find that the Word works to save sinners. The Word works to save sinners.

[8 : 22] Look at verse 13. We also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men because you heard it from men, but as what it really is, the Word of God.

We're just in passing. Notice the magnitude of this statement. This is Paul's claim to inspiration. There is this common misunderstanding.

I'm not sure exactly where this comes from, but even among some Christians, they make this assumption that as these men who God used to write the Scriptures, that they didn't understand what it was that they were doing.

That as they wrote and as they preached, they didn't understand that what they were writing was the Word of God. And that just isn't true. Over and over, through the New Testament especially, we find that the apostles are very much aware of the divine authority they have been given in their preaching and subsequently in their writing.

And Paul here reminds us of that again, that as he comes to Thessalonica and he's preaching the Gospel, he recognizes that what he is doing is giving the divine Word of God.

[9 : 37] And we continue on through the New Testament, Peter recognizes, he calls all of Paul's writings Scripture. The apostles were very much aware of that. And we find here this bold claim once again that what Paul has been preaching in Thessalonica and in other places and then subsequently in his writing, he understood to be the very Word of God, the authoritative Word of God.

And that's just in passing. He says, you accepted it not as the Word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God which is at work in you believers.

Now, two words are necessarily contrasting one another in this verse. Received and accepted.

Received here, in this case, it refers to just the basic transfer of information.

It's simply stating that what was previously unknown to the Thessalonians became known to them. They have received that information and Paul was the one who passed it on.

So, Paul was a conduit then, right? He was a conduit by which the gospel message was passed on to the people in Thessalonica. That's what he means when he says you receive the Word.

[10:56] The Word itself, it's not really referring to anything that the recipient does with it. It's just the fact that they heard the Word. This information was passed on to them. That is necessarily contrasting this second word, accepted.

Accepted, interestingly enough, is the same word that's used in chapter 1 in verse 6. Just set your eyes on it. In chapter 1 in verse 6, Paul says, you became imitators of us and of the Lord for you received the Word.

Now, received there, the Greek word behind it, it's the same word as accepted in chapter 2 in verse 13. So, in translating it, there's two different Greek words here. So, to give the idea, to set the contrast of what Paul is saying, the translators use receive for this first word that Paul came and he gave information and they received the information.

Okay? And then he uses this second word that he uses in chapter 1 that this particular group upon receiving that information accepted it. They welcomed it.

They believed what they received. So, though the Word of God came to them through the words of men, the Christians in Thessalonica did not accept it as ultimately man's words but as what it really is.

[12:19] The inspired, authoritative, inerrant Word of God. And what is it exactly that Paul, Silas, and Timothy came to Thessalonica proclaiming as the inspired, authoritative, and inerrant Word of God?

It was the Gospel of Jesus from the Old Testament Scriptures. You remember Acts 17 it tells us plainly Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead and saying to them this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is that Christ who according to the Scriptures had to suffer and rise from the dead for our sins. That's what he came to Thessalonica proclaiming. He was preaching Christ. He was preaching Christ from the Scriptures and so when he says here that what you received as the Word of God that's what he means.

You received the Gospel preaching of Christ from the Scriptures. It's the Word of God he says and you received it as such. They came proclaiming the good news of what God has done to save sinners through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ his Son.

Paul explained to them from the Scriptures how it was necessary for man's eternal salvation that God's Messiah suffer in our place as a substitute.

[14:01] How it was necessary that after his suffering that he rise from the dead thereafter and then he told them about Jesus Jesus of Nazareth as we'll celebrate all month the sinless Son of God incarnate in flesh who did precisely what the Scripture said was necessary.

He proclaimed Christ to them as the good news for sinners and then he urged them to respond to the good news turning from sin turning from their unbelief in order to trust in Christ by faith.

Jesus this is God's very word. It was his word for the Thessalonians it's his word for you. In his love God sent his only son to atone for the sins of all who will believe in him.

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law that we have broken and by shedding his precious blood on Calvary's cross he made a full and complete atonement for all who will accept it by faith and then God raised him from the dead as a sign that Jesus' sacrifice as a perfect lamb as we read in 1 Peter chapter 1 that this sacrifice was sufficient that it worked that it's enough to cover our sins we need to add nothing to it his sacrifice is enough his atonement is complete it is full and God in the resurrection says I accept it I accept this as an atonement for you appeasing God's wrath against us and then in his love God turns to sinners and he calls us to receive it he says this is what

I have done now receive it by faith accept it by faith this is the word of God and while some of the Thessalonians received this message from men they accepted it by faith as a message from God and according to the text they did so because the word was at work in them that's why Paul offers his thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians faith he knew that ultimately God was responsible by his grace for their conversion because it is the Holy Spirit of God that works through the preaching of the word to save sinners what does the word do in its work it saves sinners can I just show you two passages to help unpack this a little bit further first is 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 22 to 24 for Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom but we preach

[17:19] Christ crucified a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles but to those who are called whether they be Jew or Greek it is Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God just

meditate on that verse for a moment Paul says there's three groups of people here he says first there's the Jews and what the Jews demand in their religious pursuit is they demand signs show us something prove to us that what this is is true the Greeks take a different approach what they're seeking for what they're looking for is some kind of wisdom some type of philosophical intellectual wisdom that will satisfy their searching minds but then as Paul continues on he says that what they actually receive is those who are demanding the signs we preach Christ and to the Jews demanding signs it actually becomes a stumbling block they stumble over it they don't receive it they stumble over it they hate it and then he says then there's the other group the Greeks the Gentiles they're seeking wisdom they're looking for this kind of philosophical thing to scratch their itch and the preaching of Christ to them it just seems like folly he says so there's these two groups we come and we preach

Christ and there's the one group that's demanding a sign and this is just a stumbling block to them and then there's this other group here they're looking for some type of intellectual itch to be scratched he says this just seems like foolishness to them oh but then he says there's a third group there's a third group that upon hearing the preaching of Christ crucified it becomes to them Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God and who is it that it becomes that to he says to those who are called to those who upon hearing the preaching of the gospel hearing the gospel preached through the word that the spirit of God does a unique work through that word that opens their hearts in order that the result is that they will believe they see it they see the wisdom of God the power of God in Christ no longer is it foolishness to them it's not a stumbling block to them no to them it is eternal salvation he says oh by God's grace that upon hearing the message of Christ crucified you would be called by the

Holy Spirit of God resulting in your conversion even this morning what do we learn from this that the word works to save sinners it works to save sinners I want to show you one other text 2nd Corinthians chapter 2 verses 4 through 6 Paul is addressing or he's he's speaking about unbelievers those who do not accept the gospel at least here in the beginning and he says in their case the God of this world Satan has blinded the minds of the unbelievers and what is the purpose of this blinding to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel the glory of Christ so that they will not see it so it will continue to be a stumbling block and folly so they will not see the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God and then he says for what we proclaim is not ourselves we preach Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for his sake and then notice this last phrase for God who said let light shine out of darkness the one who is powerful enough to create all that you see he has shown in our hearts to do what to give the light of the knowledge of God of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Christ you know what is Paul saying he's saying unbelievers are blinded by Satan's deception keeping them from seeing the light of the gospel so how then will anyone be saved how will anyone move from this first category of deception and blindness to this latter category of seeing the truth and understanding the truth and believing the truth and rejoicing the truth how is it possible that any of us would ever move from category A to category B and Paul says well it starts with the preaching of Christ and then God does this amazing thing in the preaching of Christ through the preaching of the gospel God who made the world and all that's in it he shines in the darkness of our unbelieving hearts so that we might come to the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus what is he saying the word of God works to save sinners God uses it it's his tool it's his instrument to save sinners to shine the light of the gospel into the darkness of our unbelieving hearts

John Piper says we live in a day when people believe that there are many many words of men conservative words progressive words philosophical words Hindu words Protestant words we could go on and on Catholic words Baptist words there are all kinds of words and he says the understanding is that all there is is words of men and the philosophy of the day is basically choose your word just choose your word and do your best and then he says and that's the way it's going to be until this miracle happens until this miracle happens the light of the glory of God shining in the darkness of our depraved hearts through the preaching of the gospel of God in the face of Jesus Christ when the gospel came to Thessalonica the spirit of God was at work so that some of them accepted it as the word of God and the question for you is have you accepted what you've received have you accepted the word of God have you turned from sin to believe the good news of Jesus [23:12] Christ oh sinner this gospel it truly is the word of God don't let another day go by in your sin and your unbelief don't let another moment go without turning from your sin looking to the Savior

Jesus who has come to save you from your sins but then there are those of us who have accepted this word and what does this mean for us you know better than anyone else that it is the word of God that works to save sinners you know it and we have a mandate from Christ to proclaim this good news of salvation for the lost and to the lost and why wouldn't we do that we understand this some of you lived for years and years and years in rebellion against

God you knew the truth you heard the gospel and for years and years and years you rejected it and then you heard it again and God unlocks something in you and he saves your soul and then he commands that you go and teach that same thing to others why wouldn't we do that if it is the preaching of the gospel that God uses to save sinners why wouldn't we spend our lives doing everything we possibly can to proclaim the glorious good news of Jesus to as many people possible as we can people don't come to Christ by epiphany they don't come to Christ simply because in their rationality in their minds they just suddenly put these pieces!

together it doesn't work like that no they need the preaching of the gospel because God works through the preaching of the gospel he works through the word to save sinners and it's our responsibility Christians to take this word to take this gospel and proclaim it so that God will save sinners the word works to save the lost so we must go and proclaim the word to the nation enough of the casual Christianity enough of the I'll do my thing and I'll go to church on Sunday and that's it no we must move beyond this place and we must proclaim it because we know it by experience that if sinners are to be saved it will come through the preaching of the gospel and we leave that to the Lord what else does the!

do in the believer it strengthen the saint it works to strengthen the saint verse 14 for you brothers became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews we understand that wherever the gospel is received and accepted there is always some measure of suffering on the part of those who believe it's always been the case it will always be the case and we know that because that's what Jesus told us would happen and in the case of the Thessalonians that suffering was actually quite intense they suffered at the hands of the Jews in Thessalonica the same way that the Christians in Judea had suffered at that in

Acts chapter 17 maybe you just want to turn there quickly Acts 17 and you'll see it firsthand this is the record of Luke's record of Paul's ministry initial ministry there in Thessalonica it's truncated for sure but he gives us enough so that we get the gist of what was happening Acts 17 verses 5 through 8 this is after Paul has preached in the synagogues and he's proclaimed Christ from the scriptures and the verse before tells us that many of them came to faith and then that's where we pick up in verse number five but the Jews there were jealous and they acted upon that jealousy by taking some wicked men of the rabble they formed a mob they set the city in an uproar they attacked the house of Jason seeking to bring them out to the crowd apparently Jason was a new believer who was hosting the church maybe it's gatherings perhaps is why they targeted him in particular and when they could not find them they dragged

[27 : 56] Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities and they were shouting this these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also and Jason has received them and they are all!

acting out against the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king Jesus now if you've done any study at all of your new testament or even of history first century history you know that the Jews were not in favor of Caesar they did not follow Caesar they hated Caesar they hated the Roman rule they were not into that even these Hellenist Jews in Thessalonica would not have been friendly to that what they're saying about Paul and Silas and Timothy is what they know will get the people excited to do something against them they're lying about this they're twisting the truth of the preaching of the gospel in order to incite a riot and the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things so what the Jews determined to do it worked it worked now just set your eyes down on verse 13 now Paul and Silas and Timothy move on from there they go to Berea now look what verse 13 says when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also they came there too doing the same thing agitating and stirring up the crowds now

I read those verses for you so you can understand the immediate context in which the Thessalonian Christians lived it's an uproar in the city against them because of the jealousy in this moment especially from the Jews who didn't appreciate those who were being converted to Christianity and

they're so agitated by it that they're not just content to cause a ruckus in Thessalonica they follow Paul to Berea and they do the same thing there and then they go back home and who's there when they go back home all these Christians who had trusted Christ and had become Christians when Paul was there except now their teacher is gone the one that they were learning from and leaning on he's not there anymore now and now they're left there as a church to live amongst these who are persecuting them for the!

the gospel and yet they that's kind of the amazing part isn't it Jesus said he gave a parable one time of the soils and he said that there would be some people who would hear the gospel and it would seem like they accepted on the front end they kind of get excited they are joyed at the prospect of the gospel but then over time they face persecution and in the illustration he says the sun comes out and it gets real hot and they are not really rooted in the gospel and so they burn up they fade away they wither away and he says they yeah they were excited about the prospect of the gospel but they never really accepted it truly he said but there are those who truly accept it and that doesn't happen the sun comes out and it gets real hot and they remain they remain that's what the Christians in Thessalonica were like things got real hard and yet they didn't waver why why because they believed the gospel was the word of

God that it was absolute truth that it was worth dying for which is what they were ready to do and it's in this way that they became imitators of the churches in Judea who had done the same thing and as we saw stated in chapter 1 and verse 6 they became imitators in this way not only of Paul but of the Lord Jesus himself amazing is it because they're just stubborn I don't think so that's not what the text says the text explanation for this perseverance of faith is that in addition to the word of God working to save sinners it works to strengthen the saint it's amazing isn't just the flow of Paul's argument is very clear he knows the word of God is at work in the Thessalonians because they continued steadfastly!

[32 : 06] in the faith despite the suffering that they experienced for the name of Christ that's the very proof of the gospel being at work within them that's what he says even the transitional words if you want to break it up grammatically that's that's his argument the word is at work in you and we know this for you suffered and you stayed faithful this kind of perseverance it only comes about in those who have truly been born again of God by the word of God because once God opens a heart to believe the gospel he never closes it back up once we are his we are always his and the working of this gospel truth in our hearts leads to a perseverance of faith beyond even our own imaginations and what we think we might could endure for the sake of Christ to truly accept the gospel as the word of

God is to be unafraid of what man might do to us why because we accept the gospel as the word of God and what does the gospel tell us that because of Jesus we know that death leads to life what can man do to me what can they take from me and while we may fear the hardship itself and rightly so Christians will always face persecution with the comfort of the word of God that is at work in them what does the word do in believers it saves the sinner it strengthens the saint you want to finish and next week Lord willing we'll examine the back half of this paragraph and how this passage implies that the word of God works against the unbeliever but before I close this morning I want to just briefly present what is the reality for those who do not accept the gospel as the word of God for me not to do this would be unfaithful and ultimately unhelpful to do so I want you to turn just a second Thessalonians just a page or two over second Thessalonians chapter two verses nine and ten Paul here is he's speaking about the end events that are going to lead to the return of Christ the man of lawlessness or as is mentioned in other places the antichrist that one whom satan is using to deceive the world and he's addressing that here in these two verses and I want to point out something to you that he says that is helpful for us he says in verse nine the coming of the lawless one is by the activity of satan with all power and false signs and wonders he's going to be empowered to do some pretty amazing things and with all wicked deception all of that is deception for those who are perishing the tense there is important this is a present tense not those who have perished those who are perishing it's a present condition it is deception for those who are perishing because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved therefore

God sends them a strong delusion that delusion being this lawless who perishing refers to God's eternal judgment to eternal hell and these people are said to face that judgment because notice what it doesn't say it doesn't say because they are the worst sinners that humankind has ever known that's not what the text says the text makes clear they face this judgment because they

refused to love the truth and so be saved by it now what's given to us as loving loving the truth which leads to salvation it's the same word in chapter two of first the Thessalonians for accepted in one place the English it says accepted in other places It says love same word means the same thing emphasizing the same thing in other words those who will not accept and love the gospel of Jesus as the word of God for salvation will in the end perish! [37 : 17] as a result of God's righteous wrath not because they were the worst sinners but because they refused the salvation that he offers and this is the reality for all who do not accept the truth if you are an unbeliever this is your reality today now however God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish it won't perish not because you're good not because you got it together not because you were better than the guy next to you no but because you believed because you accepted what you received because you loved and welcomed what you received for God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him right now you're perishing but you don't have to perish there's no reason for you to perish except what you've received this morning turn from your sin reject the unbelief come to

Christ he will save you he will save you and there is salvation in no other name but his but you have to take him on his terms and he says if you were going to come after me what it's going to take is! that you deny yourself and you take cross and follow me that it means you forsake everything else you forsake it all free him that's what it means to accept the word that's what it means to love the word to welcome the word and Jesus says if you will do that you will not perish you will have eternal life so receive his life why wouldn't you receive it today receive it today take Thank you.